

Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

WNHC 18.83-23

OBED A. DONALDSON CIVIL AIR PATROL

15 JULY 1983



NATIONAL HISTORICAL COMMITTEE
Headquarters CAP

CIVIL AIR PATROL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview

of

Obed A Donaldson

by

Capt. Hellenmerie Walker, CAP

DATE: 15 July 1983

Location: Portland, Oregon

FOREWORD

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview recorded on magnetic tape. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that he is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. As a result, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections of a situation as he remembered it at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by CAP historians are enclosed in brackets. If feasible, first names, ranks, or titles are also provided. Any additions, deletions and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee are not indicated. Researchers may wish to listen to the actual interview tape prior to citing the transcript.

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, Obed A. Donaldson, have this day participated in an oral-magnetic-taped interview with Hellenmerie Walker, covering my best recollections of events and experiences which may be of historical significance to the Civil Air Patrol.

I understand that the tape(s) and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be accessioned into the Civil Air Patrol's Historial Holdings. In the best interest of the Civil Air Patrol, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the aforementioned magnetic tapes and manuscript to the Civil Air Patrol, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right, title, and interest therein to the donee expressly on the condition of strict observance of the following restrictions:

I will not give exclusive rights away in the event I should write (or cause to be written) a biography of my personal life and experiences in Civil Air Patrol.

Obed A. Donaldson DONOR
Dated 15 July 1983

Accepted on behalf of the Civil Air Patrol by

Hellenmerie Walker Capt.
Dated 15 July 1983

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Col. Donaldson's CAP career covers more than 40 years of dedicated service to the organization. He joined in late 1941 and a year later went to Texas as a pilot in the Border Patrol. As Operations officer he dispatched observation flights over the Rio Grande from Laredo. On loan to the Coastal Patrol for four months he flew the Atlantic coastline looking for enemy submarines. Back in Texas, he was CO of the Border Patrol base at Del Rio. He loved the friendly Mexican neighbors and came home with the nickname Pancho.

He has remained active in CAP, having held nearly every Wing billet including Commander. Long interested in leadership training, Donaldson and his independently noteworthy CAP wife, Iris, have been instrumental through the years in furthering the Staff College concept.

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CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number WNMC 18.33.23

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Conducted by:

Capt. Hellenmerie Walker, CAP

W: Mr. Donaldson, what was your vocation prior to Civil Air Patrol?

D: I was in the playing machine business - music machines, pin-ball machines - I was distributor of all games at that time.

W: When did you join Civil Air Patrol?

D: I signed the application on 29 November 1941. That was two days before the Civil Air Patrol formed.

W: What squadron were you in here in Portland?

D: Well, it wasn't broken down into squadrons, yet. I was here for active duty before they started forming squadrons. There were just training groups, two or three or four of them a week in different parts of the city at first. They took time to get the paperwork rolling, it was a matter of probably a couple of months after, it was probably January or February before we started getting training directives, as such, to know just exactly what they wanted out of the Civil Air Patrol members. The main training was done after they finally got those training directives.

W: And you went to the Southern Frontier Liaison Patrol?

D: Well, I was Training Officer here at the Wing, and I received orders to report to active duty to SLP Number 1 (Southern Liaison Patrol Base 1, Laredo, Texas). That was when the Frontier name was in it. Shortly after we reported for active duty down there, as soon as we could sit down and communicate with the military garrison on the Mexican side of the border, General Pinol of their headquarters in Nuevo Laredo told us they resented the word Frontier and requested that change. Our relationship improved tremendously between our side and the Mexicans by taking that word out. That was why it was later filed as the Southern Liaison Patrol. SLP Number 1, that was the first border patrol base.

W: And that was at Laredo?

D: That is right. When they first went in there, our operational field was over at Laredo airport, which at that time was being activated by the Air Corps as a gunnery school for training gunners. After a short period of time we were attached to the Southern Defense Command, the parent command of the 56th Cavalry Brigade, and their headquarters were at Ft. McIntosh, which is also in Laredo.

We were there about six months. They knocked down some concrete walls that were surrounding the parade grounds so we could get a long enough runway to take our little airplanes off at Laredo. Then we moved from the air base over to Ft. McIntosh with their own field. Their maintenance was done out of tents, so we put stuff around the edge of the field so we could do all our maintenance work. National has pictures that we took up there.

U: Generally, what were your duties there?

D: I was assigned as Operations Officer, which was set up on the Base for second in command. We were set up as a combat intelligence group under the orders of the 4th Air Force, and I say again, attached to the 56th Cavalry Brigade, which had the security of the United States from the east coast down to the Caribbean. My duties as Operations Officer were dispatching flights and seeing if the crews were trained.

U: Were you involved in any special aircraft incidents?

D: No, luckily I wasn't. I had a couple of airplanes quit on me, though. Once I was coming in from escort duty off the Gulf with a 250 pound demolition bomb underneath. I was flying about 75-100 feet over the terrain, about 75 miles from Laredo. The engine went into convulsion and made a lot of noise. I had about 15 seconds to land and I was too low to jettison the bomb. It was just getting dusk and very naturally I was very apprehensive about what was going to happen. Finally, just across the highway over which I was flying, I noticed a big field. In turning and trying to get some semblance of my situation, I discovered it was a freshly plowed field.

Automatically I knew it was going to nose over when I went into that, so, I called the Base. At that time we were using code mikes and I kept the switch on for transmission and gave the message without using code, as we generally did. And I guess, because I was a little bit excited, why I forgot to cut the mike off. After I got through with the transmission I talked myself into landing. "Slow it up. You're going over it too fast. Slow it back. Pull back..." And, so talking, it was probably the best landing I'd ever made in my life. I had to hit this freshly plowed field, but just had enough power left in the engine to hold the tail down. We found out

afterward that a rod had completely broke and the engine was just about ready to shake itself off the mounts. That landing was over in Mexico, which wasn't supposed to be, but we didn't have any big incident over it. We just had to send a towing truck over to pick it up and bring it back to Base.

Another time I was flying from the base at Laredo up to Del Rio, which was our subdepot where we did all our heavy major repair. I was flying very low over the terrain and smoke started pouring out from underneath the cowlings. I thought I was on fire, so I went into the emergency landing field at Eagle Pass. As soon as the plane hit the ground I was ready to jump out, but, come to find out, all it was doing was one of the rings had broken in the piston and it was pumping oil out over the hot exhaust manifold. Fortunately, there was no fire, so that was the only incident I was personally involved in.

We did have one crash. It happened on patrol. One of our planes was coming back down off the west end toward Del Rio, just about dusk in the evening. They didn't show up, so we ran a route check and tried to find them, but couldn't spot them. So, in the daylight the next day we found them just south of Eagle Pass. The plane was headed practically south, back toward the base at Laredo, but the pilot was shot and evidently the body went forward and to the right and put them into a tight turn. They went clear across the Rio Grande River and crashed over on the Mexican side. Of course, on impact the aircraft caught fire and burned, and it was a double fatality. Hewitt was the pilot and Henderson was the observer. Evidently he was trying to get out of the plane when it crashed, because his body was just about half out of the door onto the wing when it crashed and burned.

W: This was Harry Hewitt?

D: Harry Hewitt is right.

W: Who was your observer?

D: We changed all the time. Every flight was different. They were assigned.

W: Who was your observer when you landed in the plowed field?

D: His last name was Green and I couldn't tell you his first name right now.

W: Okay, Green. We'll see if we can find him. Did you ever spot any submarines, or were you strictly land?

D: No, I was on submarine patrol for about four months of my active duty time, but I never had the sense to see one while I was flying. However, out of our base there were two

submarines spotted and we were credited with two kills. I think there had been one or two more spotted that they couldn't do anything about and that's when they armed the aircraft. Originally, when the first one was out there, all they had was two little 45 caliber Thompson submachine guns, and that wasn't much of a piece of armament against submarines.

W: No, no. Was this at Laredo?

D: No, that was at Charleston, South Carolina.

W: You went with...

D: I went from Laredo to Charleston, then back to Laredo, and then was Base Commander up at Del Rio for seven months. Del Rio was the north terminal, or turn around, for the Laredo flights and the south terminal for the El Paso flights. They had some big hangars which had been taken over from a famous Dr. Blakeley, who was selling treatments and doing propaganda all over the country with a big transmitter, XERA. We took all that over at the start of our activation down there and made it into a subdepot where we did all of our major inside work on the aircraft.

W: Let's go back to South Carolina and spotting on submarines. You said that your group was credited with...

You see, there were all together, I believe, 17 or 19 sub bases. They went all the way from New England clear down into the Gulf of Mexico and there were several lives lost on Coastal Patrol because there was...

W: Were there any from your group?

D: Yes, there were two lost on Christmas Eve, 1943. They'd been out on escort duty for a bunch of oil tankers. When they started back in they had engine trouble and went into the sea. They were only about three miles off the coast when they went in. They survived the crash, but were in the water about 40 or 45 minutes, and by the time Operations picked them up, they had both expired.

W: Do you remember their names?

D: No, I do not.

W: Do you know of anyone who received the Blue Duck?

D: Yes, there were several. A lot of time has elapsed, but...there was Candler and Ben McGlashan. He used to own a bunch of theaters down in Southern California. I don't know whether he is still alive or not, but he was on Coastal Patrol from the time it was activated. He would probably

know a lot of the people who got the decoration.

W: Did you ever get to drop one of your bombs?

D: Nope, only on practice. That was quite a deal. I told you before, originally the only armor we carried on the aircraft was two .45 caliber submachine guns, and they were about as effective as hitting an elephant with peanuts. So, one of the crews from the base in Carolina was sent out one morning to pick up a convoy which was about 75 miles out to sea. At daylight they spotted a German submarine that was laying on the surface, charging its batteries. It crash dived so fast it stuck its nose in a mud bank, so the plane flew around and emptied their machine guns into the side of the submarine. As I say, though, it probably didn't even knock the paint off of it. The pilot was screaming for help over the radio, but there was nothing capable of getting out there soon enough to catch the sub before it wiggled itself loose and went back into deeper waters.

Our reports had to go into the War Department every afternoon at 3 o'clock. Gen. "Hap" Arnold, was the Commanding General of the Army Air Corps at that time, and when the report went across his desk, he said in his own particular way, "What the hell's this? Why don't they give those guys something to fight with?" And a few days later there was a bunch of 250 pound bombs and 250 pound depth charges brought down to the base. But there were no shackles or anything to tie them to the airplane, so the first bombs that were attached to those aircraft were tied on with clothesline!

W: Just clothesline?

D: Yes, clothesline, and the release was a good sharp hunting knife. Of course that didn't last very long. They soon got shackles to put on the bottom to arm them.

W: When you left South Carolina you went back to Laredo, and what did you do there?

D: I was put in operations again - as Operations Office - which assigned all the flights and was in charge of all flight operations. Then I was transferred to Del Rio as Base Commander of the subdepot up there. I was there for six or seven months, I guess, and then back to Laredo where I took 30 days leave of absence to come back home.

When I returned to the Base, I rode with Col. Harry Coffey, who was the coordinator of all active duty Civil Air Patrol at the time. He was a Portland man and was on his way back to give orders to deactivate the border patrol. So, 15 days later the Base was deactivated. I believe that was the 15th of April.

W: This was 1944?

D: Yes, '44.

D: I had asked for either a transfer or a release from active duty on our return to the Base. Those of us who could qualify were Army Air Corps Reserve. We had been for almost a year after we reported down there for active duty. My first orders after termination were to McChord Field, but before I was ready to leave, they were changed. I was ordered to report to San Jose, California with my airplane for tow target duty. I was at the tow target base at San Jose for just a week and then decided I was needed at home, in my business and so on. I went again for the inactive duty and was granted that and came home permanently.

W: Now, I like to ask if you actually did any target towing while you were there that week. How does that work?

D: Oh, ... I believe that you let out 500 feet behind your airplane and you tow it. You go to a predetermined area and then there's a bunch of airplanes that come along and shoot at that tow target.

W: Aircraft? or ground?

D: No, aircraft, this was aerial gunnery. You got some of those ambitious jockeys they had flying those AT6's at that time, and they got pretty close. Sometimes some of the pilots had their tow lines shot in two pretty close to their airplanes! So, those are the kind of things that kept you looking behind to see if you still had any tail feathers left back there on your airplane. But it was very tiresome duty. You took off and flew out to your assigned area, came back and dropped off the sleeve over the area, landed and had another one attached to you, and went back out there. It was just routine flying and it got very monotonous.

W: I have heard the female pilots were the ones that usually were assigned to tow targets.

D: The female pilots were not assigned. That's a misnomer. I don't know where they got it. There was never a female pilot on active duty flying in Civil Air Patrol during wartime.

W: This is just something that I have heard and...

D: Well, there were a lot of stories. There were never any female pilots during wartime service who were flying an airplane on a government assigned deal, but we had female personnel in administrative work at the bases.

W: What about courier service?

D: There were five active wartime services that the Civil Air Patrol performed: submarine patrol, border patrol, tow target, forest fires, and courier. I flew four of them, never did fly courier. Well, I flew a couple of courier flights but that wasn't an assignment. It was just one of the pilots couldn't make the trip. I was not assigned to that duty so I am entitled to, which I wear now, four of the five wartime ribbons.

W: Now, the Forest Fire Patrol.

D: The biggest part of that was on the West Coast in our national forests, and that was assigned out of various bases. Out of McChord was where I flew my time for forest fires. Search and rescue also was involved in that. After wartime service it was quite a while before Civil Air Patrol was assigned the duty, as they are today. During the war we were assigned search and rescue. That was one of my assignments that came under operations when I was on active duty.

W: Was that called Missing Aircraft Search Service?

D: That's right, and that was an "assignment" also. The courier service performed a terrific service for the country, too, flying parts between major commands and repair services that they couldn't get otherwise. It was almost door to door delivery, cause they could be delivered any place with the small planes they were flying.

W: And the Courier Service was in and around the Rocky Mountains?

D: No, not necessarily. It was all over the United States between suppliers and the air commands, wherever it was needed.

D: It wasn't the best in the world at Laredo. There were no facilities on the Base as far as housing was concerned, so we took over a motel out in the northeast part of Laredo. I forget how many units was in there, but they housed nearly all of the personnel on the Base at that one motel. There was a mess hall there and they hired a chef, but I didn't live there. I lived downtown at the Palace Hotel all the time I was in Laredo.

W: You were paid a per diem wage when you were on actual assignment?

D: Well, yes, all the time you were on active duty you got paid. When it started out the pilots were getting six dollars a day and the non-flying group, I think, was getting four dollars a day. Then they finally raised that so the

pilots were receiving eight dollars a day per diem and the non-flying was either six or seven. When SLP-1 was first activated I think it was pretty near two - two and a half months before we got any monies at all. A lot of those people arrived on the Base with 50 cents in their pockets, so both Jack Moore, the Base Commander at that time, and I helped feed them till they got either money from home or started getting per diem.

M: When you got this money you still had to pay for your living.

D: That is right. When they started getting that per diem, the cost of the food at the mess hall was spread out to all the people that were eating. They charged just the cost of the food. The bars cost is what they paid for a meal, which is cheaper than what they'd get out on the open market.

M: What did you do for recreation?

D: Fly.

M: You did that for your work.

D: Yeah, you did that for work, but it's the only thing left down there. Laredo is not the most enjoyable place in the world to be, as far as I'm concerned, on account of the weather.

M: What was the weather like?

D: I hope there are no Texans listening, but it's the bottom of the world - the weather. To give you a little idea of the extreme that you have in that country down there, on New Year's Day of '43, I was on day duty and at one o'clock in the afternoon it was 71 degrees. At three o'clock in the afternoon one of those Blue Northerns that are so famous in that part of the country came through and I got caught out on the flight line in just light tans and thought I was going to freeze to death before I could get under cover. It had dropped to around 40 degrees!

After living in that country, where it very seldom gets under 70 degrees day or night and it's so humid it's like a steam bath, you get 40 degrees and you just about freeze to death. In the summer time it's so hot the flying conditions are bad because on the border patrol the altitude was always low. You never got real high. On border patrol our average altitude of flight was about 100-175 feet. We could fly down a car and get low enough to pick up license plate numbers off the automobile. Nothing was supposed to be rolling in there. It was restricted back from the border 75 or 80 miles, other than on designated roads. The turbulent air would just almost beat you to death, flying in the light aircraft. We

were bounced around like we were rubber balls.

M: How did you get your nickname Pancho?

D: Well, I started a real big love affair down there with the Mexican people. They're the warmest, most loveable people in the world, friendly and everything. I really became a part of them. The mariachis got to know me; they're the ones that play the instruments around in the streets. We had restrictions on the border; the only thing we could take across was Mexican money or two-dollar bills. The reason we couldn't take any other currency across the line was because they would confiscate it. That is because the Japs invaded the Philippines and got millions of dollars in American currency and started counterfeiting and flooding counterfeit money back across the border there.

I used to go across there quite often, two, three, four times a week, and I'd have dinner over there because the food was excellent and the atmosphere was something different. The mariachis would play two or three pieces for us and I'd dig in my pocket and the only thing I'd have would be a two-dollar bill. That's like having two weeks wages, almost, and converting it to pesos. From then on when they were playing for other people in the street, if they spotted me, they'd just stop playing and come over and follow me, looking for that extra tip. I loved it so much that I learned to speak Spanish.

In fact, if all the members of the Headquarters Staff had taken Spanish, the relationship would have been better with the people, because 70% of the people, even in Laredo, spoke Spanish. There were two lingos, TexMex and Castillian Spanish and they're as different as night and day. I carried quite a bit of that Mexican brogue back home with me and that's where the name Pancho derived from. Of course, it could be from the paunch I have...

M: No, we can't see that. Now here's where your memory is going to have to come into store, too. What has been your involvement in Civil Air Patrol since these days?

D: When I came home from active duty it took about a year to get back into my business, get into the swing. I never let my membership in CAP lapse at any time. They got active over here at Wing and invited me to come over and participate. I finally decided I would form a squadron, and I did.

I took our original Air Patrol, before there ever was a Civil Air Patrol, and for two years straight we had the largest squadron the State has ever had. It was Squadron Number Two. We had our headquarters on the air base, the same as the Wing was. I stayed active in that about two and a half years, and then my business got such that I couldn't

spend enough time with it. So I turned that over and they asked me to come to Wing. I think I have fulfilled every job in Wing that is possible: Plans & Programs, Transportation, Executive Officer, Deputy Commander, and finally I was unlucky enough to be appointed Wing Commander. I did that for five years. After that I was transferred to Region and was Plans and Programs for Region for a couple of years. Before that time I had become active back at National at the Staff College.

I was the first CAP type who was ever on the staff of the National Staff College. There have been a tremendous lot of changes made in the Staff College since that first time. At that time it was actually nothing more than a big area or region conference, which didn't do any good for the purpose it was originally intended.

M: What was the year?

D: The first year I was back there was 1968 and then I was on every Staff College till 1975 and was the first Student Manager. Then from Seminar One, which I was the leader of Seminar 1, came the concept of the regional staff college. By that time the whole curriculum had been changed to a purpose which better suits Civil Air Patrol, but what it needed then and still needs now, is training of managers and leaders that can communicate - both oral and written - and that was almost 100% of the curriculum.

I talked them into starting Regional, and that would be the two regions closest together would for two years operate a staff college and change each year. They would train enough people to hold their own staff college in their region. On account of the air lift capabilities down to practically nothing, this would give a chance for people to attend without going clear across country to get there. At the same time, National would become a graduate level school.

Just before, in '74, on our own, without any help from National or Region, either one, and that's no help either morally or financially, my wife, Iris, and I started a staff college down at Hamilton Air Force Base out of our own pocket. At first National was very reluctant to recognize it as such, and we screamed loud enough that they finally figured, after we presented the curriculum to them, they said, "Go ahead and have it, but we can't certify them." So, if we can't certify them, I don't want to ask people to come down here and spend their own money and a week of vacation time and go to school if they can't be certified. If our curriculum isn't good enough for that, then it isn't good enough to put on.

Well, they finally reluctantly agreed to it and after the performance of that first one down at Hamilton, we was almost

given a blank check. So, I went back and showed them what could be done with the cost of it. Heretofore National had had a budget of \$10,000 to run a staff college. We had started out with just the registration fees we got and after we paid all bills for their housing and so forth we ended up with \$3.16 over what we spent! Looking back at it, I didn't have much trouble selling National on the Regional concept which came out in 1975. That happened for two years and then each Region was supposed to be set up. Fortunately, I was present at the birth of four of the Regions Staff Colleges.

Although support and enthusiasm dried up some, the students loved it. Some attended time and time again and said it was one of the best schools they had ever attended. Some of them had been through some of the high priced management schools where they paid as high as \$2000 for a week and said ours was still better and they got more out of the way it was presented. It was strictly for three things - I didn't care whether they mentioned the name Civil Air Patrol during the week - I wanted managers and leaders and communicators.

They need it still and if it isn't pushed and pushed real hard, from the top level down, the Civil Air Patrol is not getting its just dues. The directives and instructions that are coming out now are pretty good, but they don't have enough people to administrate them and therefore they go down the hill. You hear complaints this program and that program and the cadet program. It's not the program itself, we do not have people to implement those, and if I have any breath left in my body I'm still going to fight for that. I think it's one of the main, real, prime things that Civil Air Patrol should expand, expand, expand.

In talking to the present National Commander, I think that is going to be done. There is going to be a coordinator for all the staff colleges, instead of going out all over with ten different programs. It should be coordinated with National Headquarters training session - which has been wonderful to us to give us all the assistance and the Reserve program - but let us run those schools, which we have been doing. Originally it was all reservists that came in as our advisors, and a lot of them could care less. With no disrespect to the Air Force Reserve, of course - my connections with the reservists have been good - but there were people who knew nothing about why they were there and they were teaching Civil Air Patrol people, and I don't think it fits. So, it has changed and we are running the program with their assistance, and I think I have the greatest Reserve staff that ever happened.

M: Now what are you going to do?

D: I'm still going to fight to see that the Staff Colleges

are expanded.

M: Are you going to run any more active duty?

D: I was supposed to have retired this last one down at March Air Force Base last month. That was my twentieth one and I think it's about time somebody else took over, if they'll follow along the concepts of what we've had for the last 10 years, why it's time for other people to be involved, and just where I'll fit, that's up to the National Commander to tell me.

M: so, we'll say, as of now, you are National rather than Regional or Wing.

D: I have been there for the last eight to ten years. When Patterson was National Commander I was transferred from a job I never did get to do in it's entirety, as Coordinator for all of the Staff Colleges in the United States, and now I think that is going to happen. Of course, there's a great need and the Senior training back at National would welcome the experience of what's actually happening out in the field.

M: Thank you very much.